

Baby in a Shoe Box



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A native of Tucumcari, N. M., Mrs. Healy attended Catholic schools in Butte, Montana, the College of St. Theresa at Winona, Minn., and received her Master's Degree in Social Welfare from the University of Southern California. Spent five years as a social worker in Los Angeles. She writes: "This was a most fortunate occupation, as I met Tim Healy"—a fellow social worker, who eventually proposed to her and started her on her new career as one of America's best known Catholic mothers. Mr. Healy is a graduate of Catholic U. and is at present a Director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

When I saw the president and vice president of our parish Mothers' Club on my door step, bearing an African violet plant, I realized that this was a formal "sick list" call.

In a short while the three of us were installed in the living room deep in one of those conversations precious and peculiar to women. The subject of my illness made it a natural as I was getting about on my usual route after the miscarriage of a baby I'd been expecting for the past few months. Somehow, we women derive a

great deal of comfort and solace out of talking with one another about symptoms, pains, reactions and various other facets which have to do with the general great subject of procreation.

"Is it true," one of my callers asked, "that you actually buried the infant in a grave out at Calvary Cemetery?"

"To be sure we did." I assured her. "Why shouldn't we? After all it was a little human being and even baptized. Why shouldn't it have been buried at Calvary?"

Maybe I was getting a bit testy on the subject. Maybe I was getting a little tired of the incredulity in peoples' voices upon learning that an anonymous "miscarriage" had been so honored.

But in the little dark haired president I found a kindred spirit.

"I wish to goodness I had had such a thought when I had a miscarriage about 18 years ago," she said. "I was young then and it was depression time and we hadn't been married very long when I lost my first

baby. My husband called a doctor and he took care of me and then said: 'Burn this mess.' Somehow we couldn't even though we were so terrified and new. That night my husband placed the little body in a shoe box and buried it in the back yard. We moved away from that house a long time ago but even now I feel sort of sad when I think of that little old shoe box out in somebody's back yard."

At her words my mind went rushing back to the night of my mishap when a doctor had given my Tim the same terse instructions: "Burn all this." He didn't. He couldn't. He called a Catholic undertaker instead and in a short while a man came to our house and respectfully carried away the tiny bit of mortality which was the only tangible part of the member of our family who was that day in Paradise.

* * *

Because I have found so many Catholic parents puzzled and confused as to just what one should do under such a circumstance I am writing this. I hope it will fall

into the hands of at least one such couple. I hope too that perhaps a misguided man of medicine may see it. Because, alas, the doctor in at least one of these cases is a member of the church. He is a graduate of the medical school of a great university. But his training falls along scientific rather than spiritual lines.

The ignorance upon this subject seems to me to be of dual significance. First of all there is the pitiful picture of an overwrought husband and wife in a moment of stress and indecision making a mistake which may disturb them mentally in the future. If it does not, it may be the cause of their passing along erroneous directions and advice to others.

Secondly there is the lack of stress placed upon the dignity of the human body. There is the grave danger that the taking of such a duty as this lightly, might well lead to the taking lightly of the rights of any unborn infant when it is in early stages of development.

If the human body is treated with rever-

ence from its earliest beginnings right through its actual birth, growth and eventual decline with age, there is likely to follow a wholesome point of view in regard to mankind in general.

* * *

Our children are very proud of the small marker out at the cemetery which reads, "Baby Healy. April 11, 1949." They carry fist fulls of flowers to the baby and kneel there to say a prayer. We try to make them see so as to appreciate the wonderful closeness to heaven this child has given us. One of our own has glimpsed the Beatific Vision and is in a position to help Mother, Daddy, brothers and sisters. One who has never lived on earth, nevertheless is now living eternally.

I should like to think that this experience has been a dear and sweet one to the children when it could so easily have been distasteful. I should like to think that it will make the connotation of the term Death, a pleasant one: that they will realize that Death to the body plays no favor-

ites: that it comes to the unborn, the young and the aged without discrimination. I should like to think that the memory of the tiny grave will bring them all to other gravesides where prayers will be so much needed in days to come.

* * *

When the date came around that the baby had originally scheduled to be born my oldest son asked me; "Mama, do you wish the baby was going to be born today."

"No, Timmy." I told him. "I don't. I couldn't. It has been all this while in heaven."

I do not think that Timmy could have grasped my point as easily had he not seen and knelt beside the grave. Possibly he would not carry as clear a concept of a soul born again of water and entitled to redemption.

There are too many "infants" cheated out of their plots of holy ground. They are being deprived of the heritage of Adam's sons of "dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return".

But actually we can not discuss the rights of an unborn child in regard to burial in hallowed ground, without first discussing those larger rights which have to do with existence itself.

* * *

In the teaching of the fifth commandment which is: "Thou shalt not kill" the new version of the Baltimore Catechism No. 3 makes this statement: "An unborn child has the same right to life as any other person and may never be directly killed, even to save the life of the mother."

That is indeed an uncompromising statement. Vigorous and strong, it is breathtaking in its import. It leaves no room for quibbling as to the rights of a child yet unborn. His rights are those of "any other person".

Most of us realize that the abuses concerning the rights of a potential human being are sometimes due as much to ignorance as to wilful evil. Married people are not always fortified with knowledge More than that. Truth and knowledge in

these matters are not always popularly available, while distortion of truth is to be had for the merest crooking of a finger. It is to be had even without the asking.

How many of us have received insidious literature and despicable samples through the mail after our names have appeared in vital statistic lists in regard to the birth of a child.

The literature is copy wise. It is easy to read. It is clever and oh! so concerned with the welfare of the young mother. She mustn't grow old too soon! She must be careful not to risk losing her husband's love. She must keep herself available as a romping companion for her child. Singular number, present tense. Child. So what is she to do? Ah, at this point the circular gets down to business. There is this certain product on the market which will take care of all these musts if a given sum is attached to the coupon right now. Worry about the past, present and future is no more. This is it, my dear young mother, after all you must take care of yourself.

The printed word is bad enough, but there is also the spoken word which rains down like a stubborn process of erosion upon the consciousness of its prey. Doctors and nurses prescribe birth preventatives. The doctor who delivered my third child (I now have 9) warned me that my children would be "seedlings" if I persisted in accepting children as they chanced to come along. (This doctor was under the care of a psychiatrist a few months later and if my husband and I and our "seedlings" are sub normal we haven't yet discovered that fact). Since that encounter I have often mused on the pity of the fact that MD's wield such power, that they meet men and women at such vulnerable moments in their lives and dispense such teachings. Perhaps the domestic situation which contributed to this aforementioned doctor's unstable condition might have been averted had he been a father in a normal, balanced family.

Nurses, teachers and social workers have been known to misuse their positions

of public trust to stimulate thought on artificial birth control.

And all this while where are those teachers of God's own truth? Where is the literature of enlightenment, the phrase of encouragement, the practical teachings on the duties of married life, its problems and solutions?

Where is there information to be had as to what a man and wife are to do should a *fetus* come into the world before its normal period of formation?

Perhaps you are fortunate enough to have found the answer in your own surroundings or associates. But I have not encountered any one who has.

* * *

To whom shall we turn for proper teaching?

In this intimate phase of instruction we must begin in the home. Where parents are equipped by education and disposition to pass along the rudimentary knowledge of Life, its rights, its beginnings and its purposes, they are duty bound to do so.

By so discharging this duty they are simultaneously laying the foundation for durable and holy marriages for their children. Rather than avoid, side step, or blissfully ignore the issues of the day which have to do with Life itself, the intelligent and conscientious parent must translate those issues into the sacred language of Creation and Salvation. They must give also the dark-tinged view of Damnation, when the sacred nature is trod upon by immoral practices.

But here we encounter the vicious circle and the effect is dizzying. How can parents teach what they themselves have not learned?

Now is the time to release the Propaganda. Now is the time to light the fire to fight the other fire.

It is wrong to bury our problems in a forlorn little shoe box along with what once contained the image and likeness of God. It is wrong to muddle through alone.

* * *

We women who so much enjoy the vital

statistic chat might put our time and our inclinations to good use. We might invite capable Catholic doctors into our Mothers' clubs where in the sanctuary of our meetings we could learn the blending of medical ethics and the teachings of the church.

* * *

We could become educated to the point of passing along our knowledge not only to our daughters and sons but to our neighbors, our friends our every encounter where that knowledge might be put to good use.

We might make ourselves familiar with the practices and procedures in our own particular localities. What is done in your parish in this or that circumstance? Our pastors would undoubtedly be happy to join any program of education such as this.

It is our privilege to become voices crying in a wilderness; to help make straight the way of the Lord.

On every side we find the crooked ways declared straight and the road is not fit for

His feet to trod. Let us make the way straight.

Perhaps we depend too much on our leaders for guidance. Do we sit at home and expect the priests, the sisters, the Catholic doctors to seek us out? Do we conclude that they have no messages for us because their advice does not arrive in a package with a plain wrapper as soon as we are home from the maternity ward? Maybe we should assume a stance alongside these leaders and become one with them. Why don't we ordinary Catholic couples speak out more frequently in the proper places? No one understands our problems quite as we do.

* * *

The grave we have in Calvary marking an unborn baby's resting place is significant and dear to us all. But how terrible it is to think of the "early babies" who were not properly baptized and buried. Terrible? Well, yes, but more horrible still is the thought of all the babies-who-might-have-been who were not given the privi-

lege of a chance, who were doomed from the moment of conception, who had no chance to grow within a mothers womb, who were robbed of life before it commenced to throb.

A baby in a shoe box? Well, at least it was placed there with loving concern. Babies desecrated by deliberate interference with nature? Ah! They are the ones and their cruel parents for whom all humanity must weep!

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